

## CHILDREN TELEVISION VIEWING IN MALAYSIA

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When television made its spectacular appearance in the fifties, it was regarded as a novelty and subsequents. A number of major studies were initiated to investigate the impact of television on the structuring of family life (Himmelweit, Oppenheim and Vince, 1958; Schramm, Lyle and Parker, 1961).

Three decades later the medium lost its novelty and became a permanent fixture in our homes. But because of its pervasiveness and the amount of time children spend watching, it continues to spark off debates at different levels, namely on these five recurring issues:

- i) instigation of violent, aggressive or antisocial behavior;
- ii) stereotyping and cultivation of attitudes;
- iii) commercialism;
- iv) serving the public interest; and
- v) censorship (Liebert et. al., 1982: 7)

It is estimated that by the turn of the decade, literally thousands of studies had been done on the various aspects of children's exposure to, comprehension of, and reactions to television.

### Background

Television was launched in a grand scale on 28 December 1963 by Malaysia's first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman. Six years later, TV Malaysia introduced its second channel, popularly known as RTM 2 (RTM being the abbreviated form of Radio Television Malaysia). Colour came on TV Malaysia on its fifteenth birthday, which was on 28 December 1978.

RTM 1, or the first channel, airs mostly programs in the national language (Bahasa Malaysia) and English while RTM 2 offers mostly programs in other vernacular languages, primarily Chinese (Cantonese and Hokkien dialects and Mandarin) and Tamil.

RTM is run by the Broadcasting Department which is under the Ministry of Information. Being the government-owned media organization, its main objectives are: to disseminate information on the government's policies and plans, to encourage attitude change according to government's policies, to contribute to national integration through the national language, to help create civic consciousness and encourage development of art and culture, and to provide appropriate materials for general knowledge, information and entertainment.

On the 1st of June, 1984, TV3, Malaysia's private television station, started its broadcast. The introduction of the first commercial television station heralded a new era in local broadcasting, that is towards privatisation of broadcasting media. At the initial stage, TV3 covered only the Klang Valley (the main metro market center which includes the capital city, Kuala Lumpur, and Petaling Jaya, its satellite town, and the surrounding areas). Gradually, its coverage expanded to the south as far as Johore Bahru and as far north as Ipoh (about 150 miles from Kuala Lumpur) and later to North Perak, Kedah and Penang. Termed as the entertainment channel, TV3's priority is naturally for entertainment and profit. Nevertheless, it is required to produce up to thirty percent local programs and to serve the public and the government.

When the commercial station appeared, it forced RTM to shape up in order not to lose its ratings, advertising dollars and audience size. The viewers seem to benefit most from the health rivalry because RTM has to compete with TV3's more 'exciting' fare.

However, this did not please certain quarters, especially parent, consumer and religious groups. The deluge of the latest entertainment and action-adventure programs and soap operas outraged them. Disgruntled viewers made known their disapproval of foreign programs flooding the local television screen, the constant portrayals of Western culture and values and the increased frequency of commercials.

The battle of the broadcast stations came to a stage that it drew strong responses from the Cabinet Broadcasting Control Panel and the Prime Minister himself. The panel's report frowned on the amount of violent scenes shown on television, especially by the commercial station. The Prime Minister, fired by the allegations made by the report, issued a press statement on 23 October 1985 which instructed that immediate and positive steps be taken to reduce violent content on television, if not to eliminate it totally.

In spite of the hue and cry over objectionable content that was supposed to demoralise the nation's youth, debase the culture and teach the children negative values, no proposal was made to study the impact of television on its audience.

Among the few studies that were done on television and its audience include a content analysis of television programs by final year undergraduate students of the University of Science, Malaysia (1970) and a survey by the Consumer Association of Penang (1983). Since these were small scale research projects, they had several limitations: the absence of an analytical construct (for the content analysis) and the use of a small sample (50) that was not scientifically drawn (for the survey). These studies nevertheless provide the only available data on the impact of television on children. Among the findings were:

- 1) That in a week's viewing, there were 57 killings, 350 beatings and 365 show of weapons. (USM, 1978)
- 2) On average, a child watches television two to three hours every day during weekdays and three to four hours during weekends.
- 3) Of the top eight programs liked by children, seven contain a high degree of violence.
- 4) Half of the parents interviewed said they did not control the type of programs their children watch and two-thirds make use of television to 'babysit' their young children. (CAP, 1983, ii).

The lack of data on this subject compelled the researcher to embark on a research on television viewing habits among children and the study of contents of children's favorite television program. Only the results from the first part of the project is being presented and discussed in this article.

The following are the hypotheses to the present study:

- 1) That television is a central fixture in a child's life - therefore, it consumes a large amount of their time;
- 2) That children are attracted to programs that are action - oriented;
- 3) That television has supplanted other traditional activities, such as reading, playing and interacting with the family;
- 4) That strict parental control will act as an intervening factor in the exposure to negative content.

Although the study is not conducted at a national level, it does give a description of the present situation regarding children's television viewing in Malaysia. It is hoped that the findings will generate interest and awareness among parents, professionals concerned with children's development and practitioners in the broadcasting industry and in public office who influence broadcasting policies and practices.

## Method

The sample comprised two groups of pre-adolescents: 150 in the 5 - 6 age group (pre-school) and 107 in the 11 - 12 age group (primary six). From the sample, a total of 202 completed responses were tabulated; 125 from the pre-school group and 87 from the primary six group. Of the 202 usable questionnaires, 136 were completed by Malays, 50 by Indians, 25 Chinese and 1 Eurasian. Questionnaires for the younger group were administered by the researcher while the older children filled in the forms distributed to them themselves. The questionnaire consisted of 2 sets of questions: the first section to be filled in by the children and the second to be completed by the parents. Other than demographic data, information on television viewing habits, including program preferences, and parents' control over viewing, was asked.

## Results

**Level of Viewing:** Both groups reported spending at least two hours every day watching television. Of the preschool group, 52.8 percent spent at least two hours watching TV, 33.8 spent two to three hours and 9.6 more than three hours. There was no noticeable difference between the sexes. As to the 11 to 12 age group, girls reported spending less time than boys in front of the television sets. Fifty-five percent of the boys interviewed admitted

to spending one to two hours everyday watching television compared to eighty-one percent of the girls. In the 2 - 3 hours category, 30 percent of the boys responded compared to only 17 percent of the girls. Of the respondents who reported spending more than three hours, 11 percent were boys and 2 percent girls. The rest were uncertain.

Viewing time on the whole increased by about one to two hours and more for Saturdays and Sundays.

**Table 1**  
Average No. of Hours Spent Watching Television

Every Day (5 - 6 years)	
<i>No. of Hours</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Less than two	52.8
Two to Three	35.8
More than Three	9.6
Not Sure	0.8
	N 125

**Table 2**  
Average No. of Hours Spent Watching Television

Every Day (11 to 12 years)		
<i>No. of Hours</i>	<i>Percent</i>	
	Boys	Girls
Less than two	55	81
Two to Three	30	17
More than three	11	2
Uncertain	4	-
	N 46	N 41

Program Preferences: Programs were categorized into cartoons, comedy, action adventure series, family drama, news and bulletin, and entertainment. Respondents were asked to choose the category that they liked the most. Among the 5 to 6 years, the three most popular programs are cartoons (93.6 percent), movies (86.4 percent) and action adventure (83.2 percent).

**Table 3**  
Program Preference (5 - 6 years)

Types of Programs	Percentage
Cartoons	93.6
Movies	86.4
Action Adventure	83.2
	N 125

**Table 4**  
Program Preference (11 to 12 years)

Types of Programs	Percentages					
	first preference		second preference		third preference	
	boys	girls	boys	girls	boys	girls
Cartoons	31	23	19	8	17.5	27
Comedy	14	13	5	11	5	5
Action Adventure	14	10	16	19	30	19
Family Drama	4	10	9	11	2.5	14
Entertainment	9	3	16	13	7.5	3
Movies	14	26	5	19	17.5	19
News & Bulletin	14	15	30	19	20	13
	N 46	N 41	N 46	N 41	N 46	N 41

Of the boys surveyed, 31 percent chose cartoons as their most preferred program, followed by news and action adventure (30 percent) each. Among the girls, 26 percent rated movies as their favorite, followed closely by news and action adventure both 19 percent each.

To see how far program preference is influenced by parents' tastes, a question on parents' favorite programs was also included. For parents of preschool children, the three favorite programs, in order of preference are Movies (28 percent), News & Current Affairs (24 percent), and Cartoons (16 percent). Cartoons were also cited as the third choice for parents of the older group, preceded by News & Currents Affairs which were rated as the first and second choice (40 percent and 48.8 percent respectively).

**Past Time/Leisure Activities:** Contrary to popular belief, television viewing did not rank highly on the list of past time activities. More than half (50.4 percent) of the preschoolers who were interviewed placed recreational activities (playing with friends and/or siblings, playing at the playground and going out with their parents) at the top of their list of activities. Meanwhile, 37.6 percent cited activities such as religious classes, music lessons and computer lessons as those that consume most of their time when not at school or asleep.

**Table 5**  
Leisure Activity Among Preadolescents

Activities	Boys	Girls
Reading	56	38
Helping with Household chores	17	49
Playing with Friends	10	5
Watching Television	10	5
	N 47	N 41

The pattern varies with the preadolescent. As shown by Table 5, 56 percent of the boys reported reading (which included doing their homework, revising their schoolwork, reading storybooks, comics, magazines and newspapers) as the major activity in their daily routine. Seventeen percent listed helping parents with household chores as the main activity while 15 percent cited playing or interacting with friends. Only 19 percent admitted to spending most of their past time watching television. Almost half of the girls (49 percent) reported helping with the household chore as the major activity, when they are not asleep or at school, while 38 percent cited reading as their main activity. An equal number of girls (5 percent) listed playing with friends and watching television as the number one leisure activity.

One interesting feature of the results in this category is the importance given to reading and helping with the household chores by both boys and girls in the 11 to 12 age group. While 56 percent of the boys perceived reading as their major past time activity, 49 percent

of the girls listed helping parents as the prime item in their daily agenda (exclusive of school). They provides an insight to the different patterns in the socialization of preadolescent boys and girls. Boys appear to have more time to indulge themselves in leisure activities than girls who are expected to lighten their mother's domestic workload (like minding younger brothers and sisters, cleaning the house, helping in the preparation of meals, and other miscellaneous chores).

**Control of Viewing By Parents:** More than half of the parents of preschoolers reported determining a fixed time for watching television and the type of programs that comprise their children's "TV Diet". The percentage for both categories were almost alike, 61.6 percent for the first category and 60 percent for the second.

Of the preadolescents' parents, 48 percent said that they do have a time-table for watching television, and of these, 68 percent responded that they determine when their daughters can watch television. Slightly more than half of the parents (51 percent) admitted that their sons do not usually stick to the schedule while only 21 percent of the parents reported their daughters not abiding to the rules regarding television viewing times.

### Discussion:

The average level of viewing, which is approximately two hours on a schoolday, coincided with findings of several earlier studies on television and children. Liebert, Neale and Davidson (1973) discovered that children under the age of thirteen watched television for at least two hours every day. Greenberg measured the amount of time children watched as three hours everyday in winter and two hours and ten minutes on average during summer. Gilbert (1978) confirmed that children under the age of 12 spent two hours per day watching television. Bush, however, suggests that the amount of time spent viewing increases after the age of 12.

The level of viewing nevertheless reveals very little about the effect of television scenes (violent, obscene, etc.) on children and what the children themselves derive or learn from television. Program preferences may shed some light on the content that children are exposed to or the programs that they derived pleasure the most. Cartoons, feature films or movies and action adventure series are high on the list of favorites for the five to six year olds, while the 11 to 12 year olds cited news among their preferred programs. Cartoons, action adventure series and movies are still the favorite among the older children.

These patterns however seem to mirror their parents' tastes in television content. Results from the survey showed that movies, news and cartoons ranked among the three most favorite program among parents of preschoolers. Parents of preadolescents too indicate that news and cartoons are among their preferred programs. What this suggests is probably that children attempt to emulate their parents and/or that most parents make an effort to watch television with their children. The high incidence of household with only one television set (at least 75 percent) may also contribute to this phenomenon. The possibility that viewing time is also "family time" when all the members of the family are gathered during dinner and also the only time for interaction should not be ruled out.

This preference for programs designed for adults is neither a new nor unusual phenomenon. Early studies on television and children discovered that children showed a preference for their parents' favourite programs, namely crime and war serials (Himmelweit,

Oppenheim and Vince, 1958; Abrahams, 1956). A fairly recent study too noted similar pattern:

When asked to cite their favorite programmes, either on a particular day of the week or overall, they show an almost unanimous in difference to children's programmes. This does not mean that children do not watch children's programmes or that they will not be able to give interesting opinions about them when asked, but their overwhelming preference, from the age of six, is for programmes designed for adults (Cullingford, 1984: 3)

Preference for adults' television fare among children must have caused anxiety among parents, teachers and moralists. Other activities, such as playing, doing homework and household chores and attending religious, music and other lessons do take up a large amount of their time.

Early research on the effect of television on children gave considerable thought to changing habits and the difference television made to the amount of time spent with parents and friends. Abrahams (1956) observed that since the advent of television, radio usage among children has declined tremendously. However, other activities, such as going to the movies, reading and participating in extracurricular activities have not been adversely affected.

Although a more recent study (Lyle and Hoffman, 1972) showed that television emerged as a very time consuming activity, surpassing all other activities except sleep and school, this was not supported by the research results.

The results on parental control of viewing revealed that more than half of the parents were concerned about the amount of time their children spent in front of the television set and the choice of programs. They also voiced their disapproval of the content of certain foreign programs, primarily the action adventure serials, the soap operas and the entertainment clips and shows. In their opinion, the negative elements (such as violence, sex and alcoholism) found in these programs do more harm than good to their children.

Nevertheless, these conventional, standard answers should not be taken at face value because the researcher is fully aware that one of the pitfalls of questionnaire design is the possibility of eliciting "lightweight" responses that were given to impress. Many researchers too have realised that the gap between what a respondent says and what he actually does is very wide. The fact that they might not act on what they say is suggested by the ratings of the ten most popular programs.

## Conclusion

The relatively low viewing level (seven to fourteen hours a week or one to two hours a day) reported apparently discount earlier suggestions that television viewing is the most important past-time in a child's life. However, the survey was conducted among middle class urban children who may have the opportunity to pursue other interests. It would be interesting to know whether economically disadvantaged children would reveal similar patterns. Furthermore, it is possible that children as well as adults have taken television for granted and see it as a forgettable means of entertainment (Cullingford, 1984: 135).



It is also important to note that had the questionnaire been designed to elicit responses on the programs watched for that particular day rather than the amount of time spent every day, it would have yielded a totally different set of results. The hypotheses that children are attracted to action-oriented programs has been empirically proven even by early studies that reported 'Only the Election Broadcast and Panorama, which tend to rely on verbal rather than pictorial presentation, obtained really low reaction indices' (Himmelweit et al. 1958).

Future studies would gain a better insight into the impact of these factors: how children approach television, how they perceive reality and fantasy and how they use and process the information gathered from the small screen. Responses to these research questions would certainly yield a more meaningful data. Of the third hypothesis, the findings suggested that instead of displacing the role of traditional past-time activities, television coexists very well into the scheme of past-time and leisure activities in a child's life. There is no way to ascertain that parental control will act as a 'sieve' against negative content. Other variables such as the child's personality would serve as an indicator to how he or she processes information that are incongruent to his or her beliefs.

Finally, a more comprehensive study on television and children is called for. It is hoped that this study will contribute to increased awareness regarding children's television viewing habits in Malaysia.

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